

How Do We Fix This? by GreenLily474

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Summary: Will and El have managed to find happiness in the years since they've left Hawkins. Will has even managed to find love and Mike finds himself feeling jealousy. At the same time, he wants to restore the bonds he once had with his first girlfriend and first best friend

1. Chapter 1

AN: This has absolutely nothing to do with any of my other fics. I'll finish those at some point.

Chapter 1

Will got up to answer the door. Mike saw a boy their age with light brown hair: Eric, one of Will's friends he'd made since moving to Columbus. He was dressed in clothes that were a similar style to Will's- a couple of boys who loved alternative rock. Will had traded his games and comics for music when he left Hawkins.

"Eric!" said El as she waved from the table where their card game was in full swing.

"Good to see again, Eric," said Mike. .

"Likewise," said Eric. "The guy who was there for El and Will so much in Hawkins.

"Well, I was always trying to be there for Will since we met in Kindergarten," said Mike. He saw Will shoe his hands in his pocket and looked away. Mike felt a knot in his chest. When they were younger, Mike was the one person that Will always confided in. Mike missed that. Everything had changed the day that he and Lucas had mocked Will's campaign and tried to end it so they could call the girls. Will had stormed off. It was the first time he'd every shown that he was angry with them. Will still considered everyone to be his friends, but decided he was done with the party that day.

The Mind Flayer had chosen that day to return and they had never gotten the chance to fully repair their bond. Sure, they still had their friendship, but their bond never fully recovered. Mike and Lucas had tried to talk to him a couple times, but Will had simply said he no longer cared and didn't want to talk about it. He first used the Mind Flayer's return as an excuse to avoid the topic, and later Hopper's apparent death.

Mike felt a certain emptiness at the loss of Will's trust. He had wished

that he could go back in time and change a lot of things about his actions in the months that followed Will being possessed by the Mind Flayer and El returning. He regretted not realizing the obvious: that Will would still have trauma from being possessed and that he would need Mike to be there for him, even if Will wasn't asking for help with words. He wished that he had let El get to know Max and Will more sooner. It was wrong of him to try to keep El all to himself. If he was honest with himself, he had wanted to keep Will to himself most of his life as well... he still did.

Mike remembered looking back at the empty Byers home after the family had driven off. He regretted not saying more to Will. Mike had desperately wanted to fix things with Will, but he some ended up in a large argument with his friend every time he visited. When Mike was being honest with himself, he had to admit that the arguments were always his fault.

"Don't worry, he's got me looking after him now," said Eric. Mike felt twinge of jealousy.

"Excuse me, I don't need anyone looking after me," said Will with a grin.

"What can I say," said Eric as he reached over and patted Will's cheek. "You've just got that unspoken quality that makes people want to look after you."

Will rolled his eyes. "Did you bring some new music or something?"

"Sure did," said Eric as he patted his tote bag.

"Mike, let's go for a walk," said El as she grabbed his hand and pulled him out the door.

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After walking for an hour, Joyce came home to take El to her appointment. When they left, Mike went upstairs to see what Will and Eric were up to. Maybe they were working on new songs for their band or something. Mike stopped himself from knocking on Will's bedroom door when he heard them in the middle of a

conversation.

"We really should have a campaign. It's the perfect time since Mike's here and I really want to see Will the Wise in action," said Eric.

"Will the Wise died before I left Hawkins," said Will. "It all just brings back bad memories, alright."

"Maybe it can bring back good memories," said Eric. "El said that you and your friends in that party of yours really loved it. She also said that your drawings from it were really good. I'd like to see them."

"I just don't do that stuff anymore. Can we please drop it?"

Mike took a few steps back. He could see Will laying on his stomach on his bed reading a comic-but Mike couldn't tell which one- and Eric was laying next to him. Mike felt another small surge of jealousy. Will had completely lost interest in comics after the summer of 1985 and here he was reading one with some new friend.. and not with Mike himself like they did when they were kids.

"Sorry," said Eric. "It's just that, the things you used to love made you who you are today. I really like who you are and want to see you enjoying things." Eric reached over and began caressing Will's spine. Mike felt shock and yet another surge of jealousy.

"It's alright," said Will. "I just have...issues and I'll always have issues."

"Hmmm," said Eric. His hand moved to Will's neck and through his hair. Eric leaned in and pressed his lips to Will's before gently placing his hands on Will's shoulders and gently pushing him on his back. Mike fought the urge to barge into Will's room and scream at Eric to get off of him. What right did Eric have to put his hands on Will?

"Is this making you uncomfortable?" Eric asked Will.

"No," said Will. "I mean-I'm not ready for the whole all the way thing yet, but this is fine. Sorry."

"I don't expect you to be ready after what that asshole did to you," said Eric. Mike froze. What asshole? What had he done to Will? Mike stepped to the side just to listen.

"It's been seven years," said Will. "I should get over it."

"Hey," said Eric as he gently cupped Will's face in his hands. "You were ten and he was a fucking pedophile. You don't have to ever just get over it."

"What if I never do get over it? Will I be enough for you?"

"Will you let me hold you?" asked Eric.

"Yes," said Will.

"Will you let me hug you?"

"Yes."

"Can I ... massage your back and shoulders?"

"Yes."

"Can I kiss... your neck?"

"Yes." Eric leaned down and kissed Will's neck. Will sighed.

"Can I kiss your forehead?"

"Yes." Eric gently kissed Will's forehead.

"Your lips," said Eric as he ran his fingers over Will's lips. "How about those?"

Will laughed a little. "You've already been doing that all day, but yes."

Eric gently kissed Will's lower lip, then his upper lip. Will sat up a little and returned the kiss. Eric rested his forehead on Will's.

"Can I love you?" Eric asked.

"Yes," said Will.

"It's enough. It'll always be enough, I know it will," said Eric.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. We're not Freddie Mercury or Elton John. We're us and I like us."

"Thank you. I like us too."

The phone rang and Will sat up to answer it. Eric leaned over and wrapped his arms around Will's waist. "You don't have to answer that."

"I really do," said Will. "If it's my mom and I don't answer, she'll freak out. Hello? Yes, he's right here. It's *your* mom."

"Hello?" said Eric as he took the phone. "Okay, I'm on my way."

Mike decided to sneak back down stairs at that moment.

"Is everything alright?" asked Will.

"Don't worry, just the usual." Eric gathered up his stuff. "Do you think your mom would let me stay here if my parents ever found out about us and kicked me out?"

"Your parents wouldn't do that, would they? They love you," said Will.

"Will, you're adorably innocent, but my parents don't love me like your mom loves you. Your mom was relieved and cried tears of joy when you told her because she was afraid you were going to tell her that your condition from those chemicals you were exposed to when you were twelve had returned. Most parents aren't like her."

"She'd let you stay here," said Will. "And probably give your parents a piece of her mind."

"I'm a little tempted to tell them now," said Eric. He pulled Will into his arms again and whispered into his ear. "Listen, if you have another nightmare tonight, don't hesitate to call me, I'll be here in a flash. I'll hold you."

"Mike'll be here," said Will.

"Then we'll just have to find another room," said Eric as he ran his hands through Will's hair.

Eric passed Mike in the kitchen as he headed out the door. Mike appeared to be working on some homework. "Later, Mike!" Eric called. Mike bit back an angry retort.

Will came down a few seconds later and grabbed a coke from the fridge. "Hey," he said to Mike. "Is El at her appointment?"

"Yeah, your mom picked her about about 45 minutes ago and I thought I'd get some homework done."

"Oh," said Will. Mike tried to think of El, but as he looked at Will in his baggy jeans and U2 tee shirt. He glanced at the new way Will was parting his hair an the feathered, layered cut that was disheveled from Eric's fingers running through it. Mike had to admit that he liked the new look.

He remembered all the times that Will had come to his house upset as a small child because of something his father had said or done and Mike would hold him and comfort him. Mike had loved holding and comforting Will. He used to imagine that one day, when they were older, he'd tell Will. Then Will went missing...Then Mike went looking for Will and found El. The first thing that he thought when he found El was that she reminded him of Will for some reason.

A dislike of "fags" in Hawkins was far too common and that made Mike scared of his feelings for Will. He had genuinely fallen in love with El and before meeting her, he had experienced crushes on other girls, and hadn't felt any kind of attraction to any other boys, so he had buried his feelings for Will. When El returned, he had buried his feelings deeper and tried to act like a more typical guy-and all the burping and farting that came with it. Unfortunately, he had ended up hurting Will and pushing El to dumping his ass. Things were never the same with either of them after that.

"Can we talk?" Mike asked Will. "Upstairs, just in case your mom and sister come home."

Will's brow furrowed, but he nodded. "Sure." Mike followed him

upstairs to his room.

"What is it?" asked Will. Mike sighed and closed the door. "Mike?"

Mike closed his eyes. He couldn't, could he? But he had to... just once. Before he could stop himself, Mike quickly crossed the room took Will, grabbed his face, and passionately kissed him. He could taste the coke Will had been drinking downstairs on his lips.

When he was over his initial shock, Will pushed Mike away. "What the hell, Mike!"

Mike opened his eyes in horror as he suddenly remembered hearing Will telling Eric about something that had happened to him when it was ten. "Shit, I'm sorry, Will! I'm so sorry!"

Will lowered himself into his chair by his desk. "What was that all about?"

"It's just, I overheard you with Eric ... and I got jealous."

Will looked up sharply. "What? So you were spying on us?"

"No!" said Mike hastily. "No, not on purpose! I just came up to talk after El left for her appointment and overheard you saying... things... Will what happened when you were ten? Why didn't you tell me?"

Will looked at Mike angrily, but seemed to reconsider. "He didn't actually get all the way with me, you know. So don't worry about that."

"Who?" asked Mike.

Will hesitated momentarily before answering. "Josh Hannity, He'd heard plenty of people in town calling me 'fag' or 'fairy' and figured I'd enjoy his... affections. He said we should be 'special friends. I just sat there unable to move, but luckily someone else came along and I got away before he could really do anything, but when the Mind Flayer got me on the field that day... It reminded me of how I felt when he had me trapped in a corner and scared to move." Will wasn't sure why he was suddenly telling Mike about that, but for some reason, he wanted him to know.. to understand... a lot of things.

Mike had seen Josh Hannity around. He was probably ten years older than Jonathan and Nancy and ran a local wine and liquor store on the edge of town. The store was apparently plastered with pictures of women in bikinis. Mike wanted to find him and beat the ever loving shit out of him when he got back to Hawkins. Mike didn't care if he was a large man because he was a large man who had tried to force himself on a frightened and vulnerable ten year old boy. Josh was one of the people in town who had expressed the sentiment that "faggots" were perverts- and he had been the actual pervert.

"Why didn't you tell anyone, he should be in jail," said Mike.

"Who could I tell?" Will snapped. "My mom? Jonathan? They would have tried to confront him and put themselves in danger. If I'd tried telling of anyone else, it would have confirmed that I was what they thought I was. I didn't even know what I was then."

"Will, you're not a 'what,' you're a human!" said Mike insistently.

Will looked at Mike, his expression softened. He looked down at his trembling hands. "Thanks." he muttered. Mike had the urge to sit next to Will and put his hand on Will's hand to comfort him as he had done so many times when they were younger, but stopped himself as that had not been a welcome gesture for the past couple years.

The day Will had stormed out after Mike and Lucas had mocked his campaign, things had changed. Mike remembered finding Will at a destroyed Castle Byers (at the time, Mike and Lucas had figured that the storm had destroyed Will's old fort and he didn't bother to correct them. Mike found out the first time he visited Will and El after they moved. He spent a couple hours alone with El talking about the then presumed dead Hopper and Will had gone out with his new friends. Mike had gotten angry with Will for going out when he was only in town for a few days and they had the first of many visitation arguments). Will had been trembling from feeling the Mind Flayer's presence when they were all sitting back in the Wheeler basement. Mike had taken a seat next to Will and put his hand over Will's trembling hands.

"Don't," said Will as he pulled away.

"What?" said Mike.

"Just don't," said Will. "Not anymore."

"Not anymore? What does that mean?" asked Mike.

"Nothing, forget it," said Will.

When El and Max had arrived later that morning, Mike had started to explain Will's instincts to the group-just as he had done when Will realized that Dart was from the Upside Down the year before. Mike had always spoken for Will because Will had always been too timid to speak for himself.

"We're not kids anymore, I can speak for myself, Mike."

"So, Eric's the first person you've told?" asked Mike.

"El knows too," said Will. "You should tell her, by the way, about.. whatever happened a few minutes ago, by the way."

"What?" said Mike. "No, I can't. Please don't say anything."

"Don't do that, Mike. Don't ask me to keep this from her. She's family to me now and if you don't tell her, I will."

"Why? We haven't even been dating since she moved here and it'll only hurt her."

"Keeping the truth from her will hurt her more. She once told me that the first things you taught her were about promises, honesty, and friendship," said Will. "That is what made her fall in love with you. You just had some sort of weird, impulsive moment. She'll understand."

"It wasn't just a weird impulsive moment, Will."

"So you like both girls and guys or something?"

"I don't like guys. Just you, Will, just you."

Will drummed his fingers on his desk and tapped his foot. "What do

you want me to say, Mike?"

"I don't know. It's just that I've had these feelings since we were five years old. I didn't always understand them, but I had them. When I started to understand them, they scared me. Maybe it's part of the reason I tried to keep El to myself. I was afraid of people finding out. I thought that maybe someday, I'd tell you."

"Someday you'd tell me?" asked Will incredulously. "Was I supposed to be happy because the reason you were treating me like shit was because you were scared of your secret feelings for me?"

"I didn't mean to make you feel that way, Will. I was just scared of losing everything and didn't know what to do," said Mike.

"What do you think it was like for me?" asked Will.

"I'm sorry, I should have done a lot of things differently, but that night in the shed when I told you that asking you to be my friend was the best thing I'd ever done: I meant it."

"Coulda fooled me," Will scoffed.

"What does that mean?" asked Mike

"When you said that, I felt so happy. You had been there for me without me even asking the whole time with the Mind Flayer and it made me feel like I wasn't alone. You wanted to go crazy together with me and I felt like I actually mattered. Then you found out El was back and suddenly it was a huge chore for you to even have me around. It suddenly felt like you didn't mean any of it."

"I never meant to make you feel that way, Will. You have to know that," said Mike.

"I always wanted to believe that, but you didn't make it easy. You only seemed to care about me if I was missing, possessed or visibly upset, Mike."

"How can you say that, Will?"

Will stood up, grabbed a picture of his band, walked over and handed

it to Mike. Will was beaming in the picture. "Nice picture, Will. But what does this have to do with anything?"

Will backed away from Mike and sat on his bed. "You know what I like the most about the friends I've made here?"

"What?"

"I'm an equal member of the group," said Will.

"You were an equal member of the party," said Mike. "We all risked everything to save you from the Upside Down. We did that because we care. We would have done anything for you."

"Yeah, my friends here may have never saved me from an evil dimension, but they do a lot of little things every day. When I walk down the hall with them, I'm walking by their side instead of behind them and they don't constantly walk away and leave me behind."

"I'm sorry. None of us every meant to do it., but c'mon, Will it wasn't all the time."

"Yes it was Mike. You just didn't notice because I didn't complain. I knew my place."

"Knew your place?"

"Yes, Mike, I knew my place. Put yourself in my shoes. How would you feel?"

"Sure, Will. But while I'm doing that, you can put yourself in **my** shoes. My best friend moves away and quits everything we used to love doing together. Then I hear you saying you don't want to do any of it anymore because it brings back bad memories. You never wanted to play D&D again after that day in the basement and we tried. I even planned a huge surprise Christmas campaign for you that year and you deliberately made yourself sick when Dustin accidentally told you so you wouldn't have to make the trip to Hawkins with El and Jonathan. You ended up in the hospital for Christ's sake!"

"Because it was an empty gesture, Mike! As soon as I was cheered up

a little, I would have gone back to walking behind the group again. That's why that stuff is painful for me."

"I told you, Will, I was scared of how I felt. I know I should have handled things better, but I was going to tell you."

"How was I supposed to know, Mike? Huh? How? Was I supposed to somehow understand that you went from saying that asking me to be your friend was the best thing you'd ever done and wanting to go crazy together with me to not having time for me and constantly ditching me to swap spit with El because you had feelings for me and it scared you? And how was I supposed to react if and when you finally got the the nerve to tell me about your feelings? Was I supposed to just not form meaningful relationships with anyone else until you were ready?"

"I don't know," said Mike. "How am I supposed to feel about the fact that my best friend doesn't trust me like he used to anymore? How I am supposed coming here for a visit and seeing someone new having the relationship that I should have had with you?"

Tears started to form in Will's eyes. "You're my friend, Mike. You're supposed to feel happy for me because, against all odds, I'm not alone."

Mike buried his face in his hands. Will was right. "I'm sorry I keep doing this Will. I just want things to be the way they used to be. I want us to trust each other like we did when we were kids."

"We're different now," said Will. "And we always end up arguing every time we visit. I don't want that, you know, but you seem to get pissed at me every time I don't patiently wait until you decide you want to hang out with me."

"I know," said Mike. "That isn't fair to you and I'm sorry. I'd rather get into arguments with you whenever I visit, than never visit and not have you in life at all. Please tell my I haven't messed everything up."

Will sighed. He thought of the day that Mike approached him on the swings when they were five. "It can be fixed."

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This was originally going to be a one shot, but then an idea popped into my head to continue it into a multi chapter fic. I hadn't tried writing Will as gay before, but this popped into my head. I think the Duffers are considering it, but haven't decided. There are fans that see things in the scripts as confirmation, however those things haven't made it into the show. I do think that the line Will says about not falling in love and Mike's line "It's not my fault you don't like girls" are stronger evidence than Lonnie and Troy calling him names in season one.

There are other fans who say they shouldn't make Will gay because he's a kid. I don't buy that because people who are gay as adults were already gay as kids and there was a nine year old kid last year who came out to his friends and they ended up bullying him into suicide. So it wouldn't hurt for kids to know that LGBT people are real. Maybe it'll help them be good friends to their LGBT friends and fewer kids will be driven to suicide. And people also complain about it being forced, yet they insist that Steve should have a girlfriend.. A lot of the Mileven stuff felt forced. That excessive making out in the first episode made me want to vomit a little, but hey, they had to satisfy the shrieky squeely fans, right?

I was really bummed that Mike and Will's friendship got the shaft in the most recent season (as did a lot of character relationships) in favor of all the Mileven stuff. I didn't like Mike making fun of Hopper to his face, ditching Dustin to make out with Eleven or not noticing that Will was still going through stuff after everything that happened to him in the first two seasons. Mike was a thoughtful, dedicated friend in seasons 1 and 2 and kind of lost that in season 3. I don't think that Max is to blame for the break up. That's a little on Hopper, but mostly on Mike. I think that when he lied to Eleven about his grandmother, it was a wake-up call to Eleven that Mike was losing the traits that made her love him in the first place. Spending time with Max, helped her expand her horizons. I was hoping to see her bond with Will, but apparently she has one of his drawings in her bedroom, so there might be some bonding we didn't see,

I also preferred Hopper and Joyce as friends, as much as I ship Jopper. Their sexual tension was entertaining, but I missed their caring relationship from the first two seasons. Jonathan and Nancy seemed to be the couple in the healthiest relationship because they were honest and didn't play games with each other. When they argued, they both had good

points.

The character who made advances on Will when he was ten (Josh Hannity) isn't gay, he's a pedophile- huge difference. It's come out in later chapters that he went after both little boys and little girls.

Anyway, I'm okay whether Will is gay straight, or ace. I just want him to have some happiness.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

"Are you sure Will's going to want to see any of that stuff?" asked Lucas as Dustin loaded his equipment into his car. "He hasn't really been into that kind of stuff in years."

"He'll want to see it," said Dustin. "He's not an asshole like the two of you-" Dustin pointed at Mike and Lucas. "And he's still into science, just not science fiction...at least as much as he used to be, there's still hope.."

"I'm sure Suzie will like it, at least," said Max. Dustin's girlfriend Suzie was going to Columbus for a conference. He was staying with Will, who lived near Columbus, so he could see Suzie. Dustin had really missed Will a lot since he left (they all had). He was eager to see Will and El as well.

"Tell them we said hi," said Lucas. Dustin got into his car and drove off. "Let's head back to my place for a while."

When they got back to Lucas's place, he got a call and Mike and Max went to the basement.

"Did something happen last month when you visited them?" asked Max.

"Just the usual," said Mike.

"C'mon," said Max. "You've been acting weird since you got back."

"Yeah, well, I screwed up yet again, so the usual did happen."

"What happened?" asked Max.

"I can't say. I found out something about Will, something he'd never told me. He told El and his friend Eric, but it happened years before he met either of them and he never told me."

"Maybe it was just something he felt he couldn't talk about it to

anyone until he moved. A lot of things have changed for him since he left."

"He said he doesn't think I meant it when I told him that asking him to be my friend was the best thing I'd ever done and that I only cared about him if he was missing or upset."

"You can't really blame him for feeling that way," said Max. "I mean, when you found out that they were moving, you constantly wanted to be alone with El. Even when you visited them, you constantly wanted to be alone with El and Will felt like he was in the way."

"I can't change the past," said Mike. "I wish I could, but I can't. I try to make it up to him when I visit, but he's more interested in spending time with Eric now."

"Isn't it a good thing that he's made friends instead of spending the last three years feeling alone and scared after everything he went through?" asked Max.

"Of course it's a good thing. I don't want Will to be lonely. I'm just frustrated that Eric gets to be everything I used to be to Will and more. I mean, he won't keep his hands off Will." Mike's eyes widened in horror as he realized he'd blurted out too much.

"Eric won't keep his hands off Will?" asked Max as Lucas was coming down the stairs. "Is Eric Will's boyfriend or something?"

Mike buried his face in his hands and let out a frustrated scream.

"Mike, it's okay," said Lucas. "We don't care. I mean, we always suspected. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that I'm trying to get Will's trust back and he didn't want me to tell anyone yet," said Mike.

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"Berkeley," said Hopper as he and Will sat in the visitation room. "I think you'll do well there, kid. Stay at the top of your class a couple more quarters and you're guaranteed a scholarship."

"Do you really think so?" asked Will.

"I know so," said Hopper. "You've got a bright future."

"What about you?" asked Will. "What about getting out of this place. Mom and El will be happy to have you home."

Hopper shook his head. "I'm still having those nasty night terrors. That's too much for any of you to deal with."

"El and I have had night terrors, maybe we could help," said Will.

"Yeah, I know about the ones both of you had," said Hopper. "Mine are much more violent. Don't worry about me. This place is safe and it's a hell of a lot better than a Russian prison. I'll be fine. Just do me a favor and send me lots of letters about how great California is when you go there next year."

Hopper checked his watch. "Isn't Dustin going to be here soon?"

"There's still a few more hours," said Will.

"How about Mike? Is he still trying to make things up to you?"

Will shrugged. "I guess. But if I start to trust him again like I used to- as he keeps saying he wants me to- then what? How long is it before he just wants to spend time alone with El and gets pissed at me because I go out with friends instead of patiently waiting my turn?"

"Mike's kind of an idiot.. like me," said Hopper.

"Like you?" asked Will.

"Yeah. I haven't always dealt with loss very well and neither has Mike. We've both done stupid things and screwed things up with people I cared about. The good news for Mike is that he's still young and can start learning from his mistakes."

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"Mike, your mom's on the phone," said Mrs. Sinclair. Mike picked up the phone in the room. Max and Lucas watched and the look on

Mike's face.

"What? Is she alright? They arrested him, right? I gotta go, Mom!"

"Mike, what is it?" asked Lucas.

Mike opened his mouth to respond, but was too distraught to find the words. He ran up the stairs, out of the house, and across the street to his car. He couldn't hear Max and Lucas as they called after him.

His mother had told him about how his sister Holly had been found drugged with three other children at Josh Hannity's house. He had claimed to have found them that way, but Mike knew better. How many children had he done something similar to over the years. Mike pulled into the Hawkins police station. He stormed inside and saw Josh giving a statement.

Mike walked right up to him and began punching him in the face over and over until two officers pulled him back.

"HE DRUGGED MY SISTER!" Mike shouted.

"That's all circumstantial right now," said Callahan.

"So he just found four drugged kids and took them all to his house?" said Mike. "He's done this before. How many kids have you attacked? How many, you sick bastard!"

"What makes you think he's done this before?" asked Powell.

Mike froze. Had he managed to betray Will's trust again.

"Mr. Wheeler is obviously upset and confused, I understand," said Josh with a malicious smile. "Could you give us a minute, officers?"

"Fine," said Powell. "No trouble, Mike. Our current chief isn't as tolerant as Hopper."

"I know what you were going to do to those kids," Mike hissed when the officers left the room.

"Who's going to believe you?" asked Josh icily. "There's only one way

you'd think I'd done this before. I don't always remember the kids I try to make my special friends, but I remember your little friend. How could I forget, I even joined the search party when he went missing a couple years later. He got away before I could really make him my special friend, but he was shaking like a leaf up until I was interrupted."

Mike clenched his fists as they shook, he took a step toward Josh.

"Go ahead, hit me again. The cops only have circumstantial evidence on me, but on you, they'd have hard evidence of assault. And I bet that neither your little sister nor your little fairy buddy want the whole town knowing their shame.

"You tried to do this to Will Byers?" asked Powell as he came into the room.

Mike felt as though a ton of cement had been dumped into his stomach, he had managed to reveal two of Will's secrets in one day.

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Eric worked on what felt like the millionth draft of his essay for Berkeley as he sat on Will's bed. Will had fallen asleep next to him. It wasn't enough for Eric to be accepted, he needed a full scholarship, he needed to be free from his parents. he only had a few months until he was 18 and could be free of them, and that time was agonizing.

Eric resisted the urge to caress Will's face as he didn't want to wake him. He remembered Will's first day of school less than two months into freshmen year. He was an awkward, shy, lanky little nerd. Devon, who was already in the honors classes that that time had invited Will to join their band even though Will didn't know how to play yet. He had learned quickly. He always learned things quickly and Eric had learned quickly to adore Will's intelligence.

Eric found that he enjoyed spending time with Will and even enrolled in the honors classes later that year. His parents had been pleased. They would have been less pleased if they'd known that Eric was trying to simply spend more time with Will and harbored romantic feelings. He had found out that Will and his sister El both

experienced night terrors from past traumatic experiences. It made him want to spend more time with Will to comfort him.

Over time, Eric realized he'd fallen in love with Will and that terrified him. He didn't know that Will was also gay-Will himself wasn't entirely sure. Sure, he never showed interest in the girls who showed interest in him, but he was shy. Eric feared losing Will as a friend if he ever confessed his feelings. Even if Will was gay, it didn't automatically mean he'd be attracted to Eric.

Eric remembered the day he had finally decided to confess his feelings to Will, who had been stunned at first, Eric had taken that as a bad sign, but Will had said he felt the same, but didn't know how to act. Eric asked for permission to kiss Will, and the permission was granted.

Eric knew that his parents would not accept him for who he was. He also knew that if he went to Berkeley, he could show affection to Will whenever he wanted without the fear of the wrong person seeing them.

Will groaned next to him. "Hey there, sleepy head," said Eric as he brushed Will's bangs out of his face. "Your buddy Dustin's been waiting for over an hour."

"He's not here yet," said Will with a doopy smile.

"What makes you so sure?"

"He'd be bursting in here yelling 'wake up, asshole, I've had a long trip!'" said Will.

"Are you sure you want to tell him about us?"

"I'm sure. If Mike knows, Dustin and Lucas may as well know too. I just want to tell him in person. It'll be nice if we can be ourselves in front of one of my best friends."

"Okay," said Eric. "It'll be nice to have some else we can be ourselves around."

Will sat up, softly kissed Eric, then curled up and rested his head on

Eric's knee. "How's the essay coming?"

"It's better, but it isn't quite right yet. I have to get it right, I just have to."

"I can look at it when you're done if you like."

"Thanks," said Eric. He rested his hand on Will's side and began to massage his abdomen. Will inhaled sharply as Eric pushed up his shirt to reveal the scar from when Nancy had burned him when he was possessed to stop him from choking his mother. Eric ran trembling fingers over the old burn. "Are you ever going to tell me about this?"

"Someday," said Will. "I'm not trying to keep things from you, but it'll make sense when I do tell you."

"Alright," said Eric. "I can live with that, especially if I can live with Mike having feelings for you, not that I blame him." Eric added with a wink.

"He's probably just curious and confused," said Will. "We were really close and a lot crazy things happened."

Both boys looked up as they heard the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. Will stood up and walked over to his window.

"Is it Dustin?" asked Eric. Will nodded. Eric got up, walked up behind Will and wrapped his arms around him.

"You're not worried about being seen?" asked Will as he leaned back into Eric.

"I figure it's a good way to break the ice," said Eric. "He asks, we tell. Done!" Dustin and Suzie got out of the car. Will saw El and his cousin Emma run out to meet the couple. Dustin looked up to Will's window, spotted him, grinned, and waved. Will waved back.

Dustin hugged El, before taking Suzie's hand. Eric moved his hands up to Will's shoulders, gently turned him around, pushed him against the wall and playfully nibbled on his upper then lower lip before nibbling down his neck and collarbone.

"You're really trying to break that ice," said Will with a small laugh.

"I'm just making the ice breaking a little more fun," said Eric. He bit his lip.

"What's wrong?" asked Will.

"Nothing, it's just well... Suzie's Mormon, right? They don't like us," said Eric.

Will shrugged. "Yeah and you're a Baptist and I'm an Episcopal."

"You think there are gay Mormons?" asked Eric with his eyebrows raised.

"I'm sure there are," said Will.

"Wanna make a bet on it?"

"Sure," said Will. "If we find one gay Mormon in the next two years, I win."

"Win what?" asked Eric with a mischievous grin as he lightly traced Will's jawline.

"We'll figure that out when it happens," said Will. "Now let's not keep Dustin waiting any longer."

"Alright," said Eric.

"Byers!" said Dustin happily as Will came down the stairs. He ran over and gave Will a bone crushing hug that Will weakly returned.

"Dustin, I'm really glad to see you, but I can't breathe," said Will.

"Sorry," said Dustin. He turned to Eric and held out his hand. "You must be Eric. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," said Eric as he shook Dustin's hand.

"Suzie-Pooh, this is Will, my most non-asshole friend. Frankly, I'm too embarrassed to have you meet Mike or Lucas." Suzie stepped forward and shook Will's hand. He decided not to mention that he'd heard

their little duet over the radio three years earlier.

"Nice to finally meet you, Suzie. I can tell you make Dustin very happy," said Will.

"Thank you," said Suzie. "I'm glad to finally meet one of Dustybun's friends. Nice to meet you too, Eric." Suzie shook Eric's hand.

"So are you two alright?" asked Dustin. "It looked like you were either wrestling or making out when we saw you through the window."

Will started rubbing the back of his neck as he tried to find the right words. He could see El and Emma grinning from behind Dustin and Suzie. Will cleared his throat. "Yeah, it was the latter."

"Seriously?" asked Dustin.

"Yep," said Will.

"I told you, Dustybuns!" said Suzie.

"Wait, you figured it out, Suzie? And your cool with it?" asked Eric.

"Yes, I figured it out and of course I'm cool with it. My cousin Roy is gay."

"Is he a Mormon too?" asked Will. Suzie nodded.

"Ha! It literally only took a few minutes for me to win the bet! Told ya!"

"Well I told *you* it would be less awkward to make them ask about us and *I* was right," said Eric. He wrapped his arms around Will and nuzzled the back of his neck.

"Hey, that tickles!" said Will. "Sorry, guys," he added to the others.

"It's not nearly as bad as Lucas and Max or M-" Dustin stopped himself from saying Mike and El. "Lucas and Max are pretty bad."

"Thanks for being cool about it," said Eric. "I don't get to show this guy affection in front of many people."

"As long as you're treating him right, I'm cool," said Dustin. "Will is precious."

"He's treating me right, don't worry," said Will.

"Does Mike know?" asked Dustin.

"Yeah, he found out by accident last month," said Will. "I figured I may as well tell you, Lucas, and Max too. I just wanted to do it in person."

"Cool," said Dustin.

"Did you bring any of your inventions, by any chance?" asked Will.

"Sure did," said Dustin with a grin.

Dustin and Suzie spent the next hour showing Will, El, Eric and Emma their latest inventions that they were entering in the convention.

"Those are impressive," said Eric. "I've actually got a speaker that's been on the fritz. If I went and picked it up from my place, so you think you can fix it? Our band has a show in two days."

"I think I could figure something out," said Dustin.

"Great!" said Eric. "I'll be back in twenty minutes."

"He seems cool," said Dustin to Will as Eric drove off.

"I think so," said Will. "I guess I turned out to be the fairy that most of Hawkins always thought I was."

"Yeah, but you're my fairy," said Dustin. He cringed at his own words. "I mean... aw shit, that sounded way better in my head!"

"It's alright," said Will as he chuckled.

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Eric noticed it was quiet as he got home and went up to his room. He went to grab his speaker and noticed his father sitting in his chair...

holding an early draft of his Berkeley essay.

"What is this, Eric?" asked his father.

Eric took a deep breath and decided to be bold. "A rough draft of my Berkeley essay."

"And hiding who you really are is a topic? Your mother and I didn't raise you to be a fag. Have you screwed Will Byers?"

"No, I haven't screwed Will!" said Eric angrily. He didn't want Will dragged into things. It was true that they hadn't had sex though. "Not that I didn't want to being the fag that I am, but he let me down gently."

Wham! Eric's father's hand slammed into his face. He stumbled backward, then turned and ran downstairs. His father caught up to him, shoved him to the ground and began kicking him. He saw his mother run into the room.

"Mom, please!" said Eric.

"What's going on, Sean?" asked Mrs. Lauder.

"Our son here has decided to be a fag, Grace," said Mr. Lauder. "I'm teaching him that isn't an acceptable choice in this house."

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"He should be back by now," said Will as he checked his watch and looked out the window.

"Maybe he's getting you a present or something," said Dustin.

"Something's wrong," said Will. He picked up the phone and dialed Eric's number.

"Hello?" Mrs. Lauder said as she answered the phone.

"Mrs. Lauder? Is Eric there? He was just picking up a speaker for my friend to fix," said Will. He heard some noise in the background. He knew he heard Eric crying out in pain. "What's that? What's going

on?"

"Don't worry about it, Will. Eric and his father are just having a little talk," said Mrs. Lauder before hastily hanging up the phone.

"Emma, call the cops. Eric's dad is beating him. I'm going over," said Will.

"Will, it's not safe," Emma protested.

"Hurry up and call the cops. The sooner they get there, the safer I'll be," said Will. Emma picked up the phone as Will headed out the door.

"I'm going with you," said El.

"Me too," said Dustin. "Suzie-Pooh, wait here with Emma."

"You two don't have to come," said Will as he was about to get into his car.

"You know we do, Will," said Dustin.

When they got to the house, Eric's parents had their backs turned. El reacted quickly and knocked a shelf against Mr. Lauder's head. He was knocked unconscious.

"Sean!" shouted Mrs. Lauder as she ran to his side.

Will, El, and Dustin ran to Eric's side. He was bleeding in several places.

"Eric, can you walk?" asked Will. Eric nodded. "Let's get you out of here."

"Where do you think you're taking my son?" asked Mrs. Lauder.

"We're taking him away from here and getting him somewhere safe," said Will.

"We've called the police too," said El.

"You just watched, Mom! You just watched!" said Eric.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

"The doctor will be here in a few minutes," said Joyce.

"Will," said Eric weakly as Will held an ice pack to his face while he reclined on the sofa in the living room. "My parents don't know about you yet. I denied it when my dad asked. Don't say anything, I don't want you dragged into this."

El put her hand on Will's shoulder and he reached up and squeezed it. "You can stay with us now," she said to Eric.

"This should at least make a great essay for Berkeley," said Eric before he coughed up some blood. Will held up a damp cloth to catch it. "We won't have to hide anymore when we're there. I'm picturing us on the west coast looking at the Pacific Ocean right now in my head, Will. It's my happy place."

"We'll be there next year, just hang on, Eric," said Will.

El felt a small sadness. Although she was very good at the practical side of her classes, like getting experiments to work in her science labs, she often struggled with the textbook parts and the math. Will always reassured her that she was way smarter than any of the teachers who liked to teach out of text books and that she would thrive in college. Her grades were okay, but she would most likely go to community college. She wanted to go with Will to the West Coast or perhaps to the East Coast to be near Jonathan.

El had found someone who understood better than even Mike ever had when she became a part of the Byers family (perhaps because someone who was like a brother wouldn't try to keep her all to himself like a boyfriend did). She realized that she couldn't spend her life relying on Will anymore than she could spend her life relying on Mike.

When Dr. Easley arrived, Will and Eleven stood back as he examined Eric. El gave Will's hand a squeeze. She often pretended to be Eric's

on again, off again girlfriend to help him cover and so she wouldn't be pressured into dating any of the boys in school. She liked Eric and considered him to be a good friend.

"You might have internal bleeding, we should get you to a hospital," said Dr. Easley.

"How serious is that?" asked Will in a shaky voice.

"We should get it taken care of as soon as possible. Your brother-in-law's a lawyer, Joyce. I recommend giving him a call. Eric's parents could try something since he's still a minor. His dad's a preacher and that goes a long way in letting him get away with things."

"I'll call Andy right now," said Joyce.

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"Mom, no!" said Mike. "I'm not putting Will through that!"

"Mike, Josh Hannity drugged and nearly molested your sister and three of her friends. Will's testimony can help put him away."

"You heard him confess," said Mike as he turned to Callahan. "You don't need Will's testimony."

"His lawyer wasn't present and he hadn't been read his Miranda Rights," said Callahan. "Us overhearing him tell you what he tried to do to Will won't be admissible in court and Josh Hannity's case is very similar to Ernesto Miranda's."

"Will's just been through so much," said Mike. "I can't let him go through this, I just can't."

"I'm more concerned about Holly than I am about Will," said Karen angrily. "And if he'd said something when it first happened, your sister wouldn't be in this situation now!"

Mike jumped to his feet and glared at his mother. "Don't you dare blame Will for this, Mom. He was scared that no one would believe him and that his Mom or Jonathan would go after Josh and get hurt! He didn't even think he could talk to me about it and he always told

me everything. He was ten and didn't even really understand what had happened."

"I'm sorry, Mike. I was out of line," said Karen. "But we need Will's help now. He'd want to help."

"Yeah, he would want to help," said Mike. "Fine, I'll talk to him, but I'm doing it in person. I owe him that." Mike picked up his car keys.

"You're going now?" asked Karen.

"Yes," said Mike.

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Will had been in a bit of a daze since getting Eric away from his parents. He'd barely gotten any sleep since it all had happened. He'd been so happy before Eric got beaten by his father. One more friend was in on his secret and Dustin was happy for him. Then Eric had suffered some potentially life threatening injuries and everything came crashing down.

At least the last 24 hours had shown Will that he had a better support system than he could even imagine, especially after Jonathan had left for college. Will missed his brother terribly, but wanted Jonathan to have all his dreams come true and was glad that he was in college and on his way to doing something he loved for a living.

Late in the night, while Eric was recovering from emergency surgery, Will had gone with Eric's older sister Debbie to his house to pick up some of Eric's things. El, Dustin, Suzie, Emma, and a police escort had gone with them. Will made sure to pick up all of Eric's music and his vintage records including multiple albums from the Doors, the Beatles, Blue Oyster Cult, and Led Zeppelin. Eric's keyboard and speakers were also still in tact. Will especially made sure to grab the Clash, the Smiths, and Bowie. Boxes of Eric's things were taking up space safely in Will's bedroom. Dustin had taken the speaker to fix it.

Will had told his mother he was gay two years earlier. His cousin Emma was aware, but his Aunt Pam (his mother's sister) and her husband Uncle Andy had no idea. Will and his immediate family has

been living in their guest house since they had moved to Columbus. His aunt had gotten his mother a job at her charity. Though they had always been kind and welcoming to their Byers relatives, Will feared it would all change if they found out about him. His fears had been put to rest as Uncle Andy had taken the case to advocate for Eric against his parents.

While Will waited in the waiting room that morning, his Uncle had asked to speak with him in private.

"Did I ever tell you how my brother Joe died?" asked Andy. Will shook his head. "He took his own life."

"What?" asked an astonished Will. "Why."

"He fell in love with another man. My parents and a lot of other people didn't take it too well or treat him too well..."

"I'm so sorry, I didn't know," said Will.

"I'm telling you this, Will, because I don't want the same thing to happen to Eric... or you. You don't have to be afraid of your aunt and and me and you don't have to hide who you are from us. We're here for you."

Will thought of that conversation as he and El sat on either side of Eric's hospital bed during visitation hours. A huge burden had been lifted from his shoulders. They had a safe place to live.

"I want to hear a story," said Eric. "A couple stories actually."

"Which stories?" asked Will.

"Well, one of your fictional ones, but a factual one first."

"Eric, I can't," said Will.

"C'mon," said Eric as he took's Will's hand and caressed it with his thumb. "My Dad just beat the ever loving shit out of me last night and I want to know."

"You're really pulling *that* card?" asked Will with a small smile.

"Yep," said Eric.

"Will," said El. "You can trust him."

"I know I can, but it isn't about trust and you know it, El," said Will.

"He's going to be living with us now anyway and you're both going off to school together next year. I can start. Eric, I was kidnapped as a baby and spent the first twelve years of my life in a lab. Will's three best friends found me when he went missing and they were looking for him."

"What? Why were you in a lab?" asked Eric. El simply glanced at the glass of water on the stand next to Eric's bed, telekinetically pulled it to her hand, and handed it to him. "I see," said Eric as though he wasn't sure if he was going crazy. "Well that sucks that you had to spend so much time in a lab."

"It did," said El. "But I have a family now and I'm okay." She stood up, walked over to Will and squeezed his shoulder. "Your turn. I'll keep watch out in the hall to make sure no one hears."

El pulled her chair out into the hallway and closed the door before Will could object.

"So," said Eric. "Tell me what happened to you."

"Would you believe me if I told you I got trapped in an alternate dimension for a week in 1983, got possessed by the lead entity of that dimension in 1984, and that entity tried to kill El and everyone else in 1985 a couple months before we left Hawkins?"

Eric chuckled a little, then his smile faded. "You're actually serious, aren't you?"

"Yeah," said Will. "I wish this was all a joke, but it happened." Will took a deep breath and proceeded to tell Eric everything from the demogorgan taking him to the Upside Down to the Soviets kidnapping Hopper and faking his death in order to try to get him to help them completely open the Upside Down. Will's now memories had returned and they were able to find Hopper..

"Wow, you were right when you said I'd understand when you told me about... everything," said Eric.

"So you believe me?" asked Will.

"You're not exactly the kind of person who would spew bullshit at a time like this," said Eric. He gazed at Will thoughtfully for a moment, then scooted over and patted the spot next him. "Hop on up here."

"You just had a minor surgery and you've got cuts and bruises all over," said Will as he pointed at Eric's black eye, his bandaged fingers, busted lip and stitches on his cheek. "I don't want to risk hurting you."

"Well, you're the size of a toothpick," said Eric. "So there's plenty of room for you to sit up here without causing me further injury."

"El's also waiting outside," said Will as he thought of all the times Mike visited and wanted to be alone with El. Will had understood, but wasn't a huge fan of constantly being asked to leave and he didn't want El to feel the way he sometimes felt. "I don't want her to have to just sit there."

"Just for a few minutes," said Eric. "I'll do something really nice for her later."

Will decided it was easier to just humor Eric and do what he wanted instead of arguing with him. He crawled up onto the spot next to his boyfriend. He laid on his side to face Eric.

"See?" said Eric as he reached over and caressed Will's face. "Plenty of room. I'd ask if your mother ever feeds you, but I know your mother and she probably over feeds you."

"She tries," said Will. Eric tried to lean a little closer to Will, but grunted in pain.

"Come a little closer, will you? I've barely had any physical contact with you since yesterday. The endorphin rush will help me heal faster."

Will sat up on his knees and gingerly leaned forward. He tenderly the

parts of Erin's lips that weren't cut before moving on to the parts of his cheeks and forehead that didn't have stitches.

Eric sighed before returning the favor. He winced a couple times thanks to the cut on the side of his mouth, then laughed a little and muttered "learning curve" as the uninjured part of his mouth traveled all over Will's face and neck. He finally rested his head on Will's shoulder.

Will put his arms around Eric taking care not to brush any of his injuries. "I feel better already," said Eric. "They should just let you stay here with me until I get out of here."

"You seem to be in a good mood considering... everything," said Will.

"I'm free from my parents," said Eric. "And I get to stay with you and your family."

"I'm happy about that too, I just wish you didn't have to get beat up for it to happen," said Will.

"I'll heal," said Eric. "And I'll be able to hold and kiss you as much as I want."

"Maybe we could do more. I mean, you deserve it," said Will. "I can at least try."

Eric tilted his head a little to look Will in the eyes. "No, you're not ready. I'll never do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

"I can try to get comfortable with it," said Will.

"Really?" asked Eric. He rested his hand on Will's knee. "May I?" Will nodded. Eric moved his hand slowly up the inside of Will's thigh. When it was close to the top of his leg, Will froze. Terror gripped him and Eric pulled his hand away. He sat up, turned to Will and gently took his face in his hands. "It's okay, you aren't ready. Even if you're never ready- and that's a huge possibility after all you went through with the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer- you'll always be more than enough for me. I don't want you to ever feel like you have to."

"It's not right," said Will. "You're not him. You're nothing like him."

"Damn right!" said Eric. "He's a fucking pedophile who saw you as an object for his personal pleasure. I'm someone who loves you and just wants you to be happy."

"I'm someone who loves you and wants you to be happy too," said Will.

"You make me happy, you always have." Eric leaned back on his pillow as he held Will's hand. "Speaking of being happy, I've been thinking..."

"Thinking about what?" asked Will.

"Well, maybe when we go to the orientation at Berkeley next summer, we can take a road trip and see things like Mount Rushmore and the Grand Canyon. We can take my van and camp out in it sometimes and stay in crappy motels. I want to see the world with you and we can start with some famous landmarks."

"That would be pretty awesome actually," said Will.

"It would," said Eric. "We can just start saving extra money from our jobs." He glanced out the window at the sunshine. "Know what else would be awesome?"

"What?" asked Will.

"A walk. This is probably one of the last nice days of the year and I want some fresh air. El could probably use some as well."

"Sound like a plan," said Will. He pointed to the folded wheelchair the corner. "But you'll have to get into that."

"Seriously?" Eric groaned.

"Very seriously," said Will. He hopped off the bed, grabbed Eric's jacket and helped him into it before slipping into his own jacket. He then assembled the wheelchair and helped Eric into it. As Will turned to grab El's jacket, Eric gently grabbed his wrist. Will turned around and Eric gently tugged on his shirt. Will leaned down and kissed him and Eric brushed Will's neck with the tips of his fingers.

"Sorry, just getting some last minute stuff in before you open the door," said Eric.

"Whatever helps you heal faster," Will murmured as Eric reached under his shirt and caressed the scar from where Nancy had burned him while he was possessed. Knowing the whole story only made Eric want to shower Will with even more affection.

"Will?"

"Yes?"

"I-I keep thinking that my dad may have actually killed me if you and your friends had stopped him. I'm just focusing really hard on things that make me happy. I have to."

"I can understand that," said Will.

"You and El can probably understand it better than anyone. Now, let's get going on that walk."

Will opened the door and handed El her coat. "Are we going somewhere?"

"Just getting some fresh air," said Will as he started pushing Eric's wheelchair.

"I was just telling Will that I need to do something nice for you, El," said Eric as they headed down the hall to the courtyard.

"You don't have to do anything for me, we're friends," said El.

"I know I don't technically have to, but I want to," said Eric. "I just need to figure it out, but it'll be something awesome."

"It's pointless to resist," said Will.

"Okay," said El. "He can surprise me."

When they got to the courtyard, they saw Joyce in a heated argument with Eric's mother.

"Joyce, please, I'm trying to save my son's soul. Your son is a good boy, but he clearly presents temptation for Eric," said Mrs. Lauder.

Joyce took a puff off her cigarette and flicked it on the ashtray. "Sorry, Grace, Eric isn't safe at your house anymore. He'll always have a home at mine."

"What kind of mother are you?" asked Mrs. Lauder. "You're just letting your son be exposed to my son's... sickness."

Will started forward, but Eric grabbed his arm. "She doesn't know about you and I don't want you dragged into my parents' bullshit." Will relaxed and gently squeezed Eric's hand.

Joyce put out her cigarette in the ashtray. "My son has had more than one near death experience, you know. Those moments were the worst of my life because I love my children more than anything. You just stood idly by while your husband nearly killed your son- who, by the way is a great person- so you'll have to excuse me if I don't take your parenting advice, Grace."

Eric tapped Will on the arm and gestured for him to push the wheelchair toward their mothers. "She really doesn't need and parenting advice from you, Grace!" Eric spat when they were close enough.

"Eric, please," said Mrs. Lauder. "There are places we can send you that will cure you."

"He doesn't need to be cured," said El angrily. "And you aren't supposed to be here."

"I'm trying to help my son."

"You should have tried to help him last night," said Will. "Now get out of hospital or we'll call the police."

Mrs. Lauder stood there for a moment. "This isn't over," she said before storming off. Eric glared in the opposite direction.

"Is she gone yet?"

"Yeah," said Will.

"Thanks, Mrs. Byers. Will wasn't kidding when he said you'd tell off my parents," said Eric.

"They're pretty easy to tell off," said Joyce as she lit another cigarette. "The doctors said you should be able to come home with us in a couple days. How are you feeling?"

"Better," said Eric.

"Hey!" Dustin called from across the courtyard. The group looked over to him heading over with Suzie.

"How'd it go today?" asked Will.

"Suzie moved on to the final round because she's brilliant," said Dustin.

"Wish we could have been there," said Eric. "Are you doing any science fairs any time soon, Dustin? I'd like to see it."

"There'll be one in Hawkins next spring," said Dustin. Eric playfully elbowed Will.

"We should go and give our friend here some support."

"Sure, why not?" said Will with a small smile.

"Eric's awesome!" said Dustin.

"Agreed," said Will.

"Is that Mike?" asked Dustin as he looked to the end of the courtyard and shaded his eyes. Everyone else followed his gaze. Mike was approaching the group looking anxious.

"Mike, what are you doing here?" asked El.

Mike walked up to El and squeezed her shoulder. "Sorry, I know this isn't the best time; but something happened and I had to come and talk in person.

"What happened?" asked Joyce.

"Sorry everyone, but can I talk to Will in private first?"

"Yeah, sure," said Will. He jerked his head for Mike to follow him to a quiet corner of the courtyard. "What happened, Mike?" he asked when they got there.

"Holly and three of her friends were drugged... by Josh Hannity."

"What?" said Will. "Shit!" He slowly sank to the bench and Mike cautiously took a seat next to him.

Will buried his face in his hands. "This is my fault. I should have said something when it happened...who knows how many kids he's..."

"It's not your fault, Will. You were just a kid. He's the asshole who did all this."

"Is Holly alright?"

"As far as we can tell, he didn't get anywhere with her or her friends before someone walked in on him. When I heard, I just lost it. I went to the station and just started hitting him as hard as I could."

Will look up. "I kind of wish I could have seen that... or helped."

"There's something else that happened Will and I had to tell you about it in person," said Mike. Will glanced across the courtyard at his concerned friends and family members.

"What?"

"He remembered you. He didn't go into specific details, but he remembered you. Callahan overheard him taunting me about it, but it's inadmissible in court...they want you to testify."

Will took a couple of calming breaths into his hands. He was silent for a couple minutes and Mike didn't try to force him. "Fine, I'll do it," Will finally said. "Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

"Max and Lucas guessed that Eric is your boyfriend. It's my fault and

I'm sorry. I didn't want to break your trust and I screwed up twice in one day."

"Do Max and Lucas have a problem with Eric being my boyfriend?" asked Will. Mike shook his head. "Good, now at least I know that my closest friends from Hawkins are okay with it."

"They're more than okay with it, Will. But still, I screwed up and I'm sorry."

"It's fine, Mike. It wasn't on purpose. It's just... thinking of Josh Hannity is making me feel like I'm going to vomit. Maybe I can help stop him for good...Maybe."

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

"I finally have it right," said Eric as he held up a notebook when Will and Mike entered his hospital room.

"You finished your Berkeley essay?" asked Will.

"I was having trouble getting to sleep last night," said Eric. "But it was in my head, I wrote down, then slept like a baby."

"Want me to proofread it?" asked Will.

"I need all the help I can get, and you're the best person to help me," said Eric as he handed Will the notebook. He then reached up to touch Will's face, grunted in pain and gestured for him to move closer. Will stepped forward and leaned down. Eric reached up and caressed Will's cheek with his thumb and brushed the back of his neck with the tips of his fingers. Mike felt like he was intruding on something. He had a tiny urge to tell Eric that he didn't need to be so handsy with Will. He successfully fought that urge. Dustin had not so delicately point out the night before that Eric and Will were tame compared the Mike and El the first six months of 1985.

"You're actually mentioned several times. Berkeley's only a possibility because of you," said Eric

"You did the work yourself. You made it possible," said Will.

"Yeah, but I only did all that work and only thought I could do better because of you...And I do talk about how you inspired me quite a bit in this essay..not by name, just in case," said Eric.

"That cat's probably going to be out of the bag next weekend after the deposition anyway," said Will.

"Maybe not," said Eric. "Your uncle seems determined to protect you from it."

"We'll see. But it'll be worth it if that asshole goes to jail."

"Speaking of your uncle, he said he'd sit with me so you can go to that science conference and give some support to Dustin and Suzie."

"I don't want to just leave you here," said Will.

"You're not. Did you get my camera from my parents' house?" Will nodded. "It has almost a full roll of film in it. Take some pictures for me."

"Eric-

"Will, Dustin's a good friend to you. Spend some time with him and take some pictures for me."

"Alright, I'll do that."

"Great, do you mind if I have a quick word with Mike?"

"With me?" asked Mike. "Why?"

"I just have a couple things I want to discuss," said Eric. He looked at Will. "Don't worry, I'll be civil."

"I'll pick up a floppy disk and get this essay typed up," said Will.

"Do they have computer labs in this place or something?" asked Mike.

"It's a university hospital," said Will. He leaned over, gave Eric a quick kiss, then patted Mike on the arm and left the room.

Mike stared at his feet. "Have a seat, Mike," said Eric. "I won't bite, I promise."

Mike took a seat. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I'll get right to the point: I overheard your conversation last night. There one where you told Will that you felt like I was replacing you in his life-

"How-" Mike started.

"El was wheeling me around the hospital last night, but that's not the point."

"No, the point is that you were listening to a private conversation," said Mike.

"You're right, I was," said Eric. "And you were listening to a private conversation I had with Will last month, so let's call it even."

"Fine," said Mike. "We'll call it even. Did you hear Will's reply?"

Mike recalled every word Will had said.

"Eric didn't replace you Mike. You were my best friend and your friendship meant everything to me, but... I never actually had romantic feelings for you."

"I heard what Will said, but he had already told me that and I had no reason to doubt him."

"Look. if this is about me kissing him, I'm sorry. I was way out of line."

"Yeah, it was, but since Will has forgiven you, so can I. For the record, though, I can't blame you for your feelings toward my guy. I can however blame you for thinking he should just wait around for you to have the courage to confess your feelings. I was terrified when I decided to tell Will how I felt. He could have been completely disgusted and I could have lost him as a friend. I didn't know whether he was gay or not before I told him how I felt, and even if he was, it didn't automatically mean he'd feel the same way. It was a huge risk and I was very lucky that it paid off. Oh and let's not forget El. Will hasn't and he wasn't going to sit around waiting for you to make a choice between him and El. She's my friend too, by the way."

"It wasn't... it wasn't like that, okay?"

"Really? Then what was it like?"

"I just made a lot of bad decisions. Will needed me and I wasn't there for him the last few months before they moved here because I was so focused on El. I really missed him and regretted not talking to him more and convinced myself that he seemed fine even though deep down I knew he wasn't. Then he moved here and made new friends and I resented that. I even started blaming El for Will not needing me

anymore and she blamed me for not hearing the heart to heart her dad was going to give us."

Mike remembered that argument.

"You changed Mike."

"How have I changed, El?"

"You kept me from being friends with Will and Max! You made Will cry. You laugh at people. You laughed at my dad I never got to hear his heart to heart," said El as tears started falling.

"You were laughing too," said Mike. "I gave you everything, El. I spend all my time with you and it ruined my relationship with Will. I never fixed things with him because I was always trying to be there for you!"

"That wasn't her fault Mike," said Will, who appeared in the doorway of El's room after the noise from their argument had caught his attention. "None of it was her fault."

Mike wanted to go back in time and kick his own ass as he remembered that argument. He had made up with Will and El, but that fight put more distance between him and them. "I've tried to fix things when I visit, but keep screwing things up because I've resented the fact that they've moved on and I really haven't."

"And yet they keep inviting you back and keeping you in their lives," said Eric.

"Yeah, for some reason they do."

"Do you want to fix things, Mike?" asked Eric.

"Yeah, I do. I really do," said Mike.

"Believe it or not, I want you to fix things as well."

"You do? Why?"

"Because you're important to Will.. and El. I think they want to fix things as much as you do, but they're scared. You were the first friend

they both ever had, but they trusted you and got hurt..more than once."

"I know," said Mike.

"Will's going to need you next weekend when he gives that statement. He's going to have to recall a lot of things he never wanted to think about again. I've seen how it affects him. He'll be quiet and moody after he gives his statement. He's risking a lot to try to get that asshole put away."

"What do you mean?"

"He's probably going to be the Valedictorian of our class. He's worked really hard for it," said Eric.

"Why would his testimony affect that?" asked Mike.

"Hannity's lawyer is going to try to discredit Will and any other kid that comes forward. I know there were rumors about Will in Hawkins. They'll try to out him- claim that he must have wanted Hannity to grope him-"

"What?" said Mike. "That's ridiculous! Why would a ten year old kid want and adult to... to.."

"Most people think guys like Will and me are perverts," said Eric. "When my sister was in the second grade, there was a boy in her class who kept kissing her. She didn't like it and kept telling him to stop. Most people thought it was cute and told her she should put up with it because he liked her. It really upset her. That kid got worse as he got older: grabbing and groping half the girls in school and people just wrote it off as being a typical guy.

"Those same people would be disgusted if I so much as held Will's hand in public. We're being perverts by just existing in their eyes. So yeah, in their minds, Will would have been asking for it."

"It's not right," said Mike.

"No, it isn't right," said Eric. "Will is also on his way to being Valedictorian. He's worked really hard for it. If people find out he's

gay, some might try to get that taken away."

"They couldn't do that, could they?" asked Mike.

"It's happened before in other places," said Eric. "By the way, I'm sorry if you think I'm being a little too handsy with Will, I'm just making up for time I can't show him any affection whatsoever because the wrong people might see and make our lives hell. Yes, I heard that part of your conversation too."

"I'm sorry about that, Eric. I keep trying to not be a jerk and failing. I do like the fact that Will is with someone who cares about him so much."

"I do care about him and want him to be happy," said Eric. "I think he'll be happier if he and El fix their relationships with you."

"I'd be happier," said Mike. "How do you suggest we fix it? I'm all ears."

"D&D campaign. A really awesome one could be a good start."

"Yeah right," said Mike with a sour laugh.

"I'm serious," said Eric.

"Trying to have a D&D campaign is only going to piss Will off, trust me," said Mike.

"Why are you so sure about that?" asked Eric.

"I tried to have a couple campaigns in the last few weeks before they moved here," said Mike. "Will was making all the risky moves early in the campaigns. He claimed he was trying to make his final campaigns memorable, but he was trying to get his character killed on purpose so he wouldn't have to play anymore."

"How do you know?" asked Eric.

"Because he told me at Christmas," said Mike. "Remember when he was in the hospital for an allergic reaction that year?"

"Yep, me and the rest of the band visited him," said Eric.

"He gave himself that reaction on purpose because Dustin got drunk and accidentally told him about the surprise campaign. He told me he hated D&D when I confronted him about it. Then last month he said the campaigns were empty gestures because I'd stop caring as soon as he was cheered up."

"Then we'll just have to show him that you'll still care when he's happy," said Eric as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"That's what I've been trying to do," said Mike.

"Well, you didn't have me helping you up until now," said Eric.

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Eric sat at his keyboard Wednesday night in Will's room trying to think of something to play. The room was crowded with boxes of Eric's stuff. They figured they had plenty of time to organize everything. Eric smiled. It already felt more like home than his parents house ever had.

Will came into the room with a glass of water and some pain medication for Eric.

"Time for bed," said Will after Eric swallowed his pills.

"Since when have we gone to bed this early?" asked Eric.

"Since you started recovering from some nasty injuries," said Will. He gently tugged on Eric's arm and lead him to the full sized bed. Will had kept his twin bed from Hawkins for when friends visited. "Once you're healed, we can stay up as we want."

Will draped the covers over Eric, then went to get into the twin bed. Eric grabbed a fist full of material on the back of Will's shirt. "There's plenty of room here."

"It's not safe," said Will.

"Your family doesn't care."

"That's not the issue. What if I have a night terror and start thrashing around?"

"I've handled those before-pretty well, I might add. Now I know the truth behind them and I can handle them even better."

"Yeah, when you handled them before, you didn't have stitches all over your body. I don't want to cause any more injuries for you."

"You won't."

"Tell you what. Once you heal, I'll sleep wherever you want me to sleep. Until then, I'm sleeping there," said Will as he pointed to the smaller bed.

"Hmmm, wherever I want you to sleep," said Eric thoughtfully. "I'm going to hold you to that. For now though, can we at least snuggle for a few minutes? You can tell me part of one of your stories." Eric held his arms like and imploring child.

"Fine," said Will. "Twenty minutes." He set a timer on his watch and turned out the light.

"What's that for?" asked Eric as Will slid next to him under the covers.

"Just in case I drift off," said Will.

"I can help prevent you from drifting off," said Eric with a small grin that Will could vaguely make out as the moonlight hit his face. He rolled over onto his side and rested his hand on the side of Will's face.

"Be careful," said Will. "Don't hurt yourself."

Eric leaned in more so he was almost completely on top of Will. His face was less than an inch from Will's. "It's okay," Eric whispered as he began tracing Will's face with the tip of his finger. "I'm feeling a lot better. Just a little sore; and this will give me some of those healing endorphins and help you relax a little before you fall asleep."

"I can't argue with that logic," said Will. "Just be careful and don't pop your stitches."

Eric chuckled and playfully tapped the tip of Will's nose. "You worry too much, Snugglebug."

"Snugglebug?" asked Will as Eric's lips danced on his neck. Will reached up and gently massaged the back of Eric's neck while he waited for an answer. After about a minute, Eric rested his forehead on Will's.

"Well, I had a lot of time to think about things in the hospital and thought about how much I love snuggling with you, so Snugglebug is my cute little pet name for you. What do you think?"

"Hmmm," said Will. "I like it. You can be Cuddlebunny."

"Yeah, I say we only use those names around each other or our friends will never let us live it down."

"Agreed, Cuddlebunny," said Will.

"I like having cute little pet names already, Snugglebug," said Eric as he pressed his lips to Will's. He winced a bit as he brushed the cut on his lip from one of the many places his father had hit him five days earlier. He quickly switched to nibbling Will's lower lip, then moving to his upper lip and switched back to his lower lip.

Eric's right hand moved under Will's shirt and caressed the old burn scar. His hand traveled up Will's torso and massaged it along the way. He suddenly pulled back and sat up. He winced a bit as the soreness from the various stitched up wounds.

"Shit!"

"What's wrong?" asked Will as he sat up as well. "Does something hurt?"

"No, no I'm fine," said Eric. "I just wasn't thinking."

"What do you mean?" asked Will as he gently massaged Eric's shoulder.

"You've got that deposition in a couple days. It's bringing up a lot of bad memories and here I am putting my hands all over you like a-"

"You weren't doing anything that was making me uncomfortable," said Will. "You never do."

"I have once...twice if you count last Saturday."

"You didn't know what had happened to me the first time-I didn't even know it would trigger the memory and I'd react that way- and last Saturday, you didn't actually do anything, you were just making a point," said Will as he rested his chin on Eric's shoulder then reached down and took his hand. Eric closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"I just want to be extra careful not to do anything that causes you any kind of pain, just like you're being careful with me because of all this," Eric indicated his injuries. The timer Will had set on his watch went off. "Time for both of us to get some actual sleep, Snugglegub."

"Alright, Cuddlebunny," said Will. He carefully, but tenderly kissed Eric. "And you really weren't making me uncomfortable at all. I've got plenty of issues, but you aren't one of them. I've been able to cope better with everything because of you."

"Good," said Eric as he caressed the contours of Will's face with the tips of his fingers. "I'm going to make sure it stays that way. The better coping, not the issues."

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"Can I talk to you for a minute, El?" said Mike as Will was in the study with his uncle and mother preparing for the deposition before the lawyers and mitigatory arrived. Eric gave him an encouraging smile and a wink from behind El before glancing back anxiously in the direction of Will.

"Yes," said El. She nodded her head in the direction of the back door. Mike followed her to the back porch. "What is it, Mike?"

Mike pulled a letter from his pocket and handed it to her.

"You got into OSU? I didn't even know you applied," said El.

"My dad would prefer than I was a Hoosier instead of a Buckeye, but I have my own ideas..."

"Is this because of me, Mike? You can't plan your life around me and I can't plan mine around you either."

"I know," said Mike. "But OSU is a great school, even if they do put too much emphasis on football. If you don't want me to go there, just say the word. I've screwed up so many things with you and Will over the years and I've wanted to fix those things so badly, but I've always tried to do it on my terms without thinking about what either of you want and that was wrong."

"Yes, it was," said El as she handed Mike back his letter. He pulled another envelope from his pocket and checked it before handed it to her. "What's this?"

"It's a letter I wrote to you. Just a lot of things I've wanted to say over the years, but kept screwing it up. I decided to just write it all down. You don't have to read it yet if you don't want to."

"Can I show it to Will?" asked El as she examined the envelope.

"If you want to, it's your choice," said Mike. "I wrote him one too. I don't know when I'm going to give it to him with... everything he has to think about today, but he can show his letter to you as well if he wants."

El folded the envelope and stuffed it in her pocket. "That's a good idea- writing things you want to say down. Max says you put your foot mouth a lot and she's right."

Mike was tempted to give the old retort that Max was conspiring behind his back again, but he bit his tongue. Max had been a good friend to him and he knew she was right. "Yeah, I do put my foot in my mouth a lot."

"What about Will?" asked El. "Do you regret kissing him?"

"Yes, I do regret it," said Mike.

"Because you were just curious, like Will thinks you were?"

"No," said Mike. "I regret it for a lot of reasons, but I wasn't just curious. Those feelings were real."

"Then why do you regret it? I want to hear the reasons." said El.

Mike sighed, shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned on the side of the house. He owed her an explanation. "I wasn't really thinking about Will's feelings when I did it. I was just jealous of Eric. I didn't even think about the fact that I'd overheard him talking about what Josh Hannity had done to him until he pushed me away. I also regret that I took Will for granted. He was right when he said that. He was also right when he said that I should be happy for him.

"I've been selfish about a lot of things in my life, El. I tried to keep you all to myself all those months because I was afraid to lose you and that was wrong. Maybe I even tried to keep Will all to myself for years too. I figured I could just brush him aside and he'd patiently wait for me. That wasn't being a good friend to him."

"No, Mike, it wasn't. But you're not a selfish person. You took me in from the rain the first night we met. And you jumped off a cliff to save Dustin. Selfish people don't do stuff like that."

"I've forgotten to do stuff like that," said Mike. "I'm trying to remember again."

Cars pulled into the driveway. "That's the people taking the deposition," said El. "We should go and tell Will we're there for him before he talks to them."

"Yeah," said Mike. He open the door and held it for her. El stopped in the doorway and turned to Mike.

"I think you should go to OSU. If you really want to, it's worth a shot."

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Will's hands shook as he clutched the material of his jeans just above his knees. To his right, his uncle put a comforting hand on his

shoulder. Too his left, his mother did the same. She was crying, but trying to keep it under control. It was the first time Will had ever spoken the details of what Josh Hannity had done to him out loud. He had only just told his mother what had happened the previous weekend when Mike had driven from Hawkins to tell him about Holly in person. He'd only spoken in vague terms when he had told his mother, El, Eric, and Mike.

Hank Burman, the defense lawyer, leaned forward. "Well, that would be a very upsetting story if it were true, Mr. Byers." Will glared at him.

"It is true, all of it."

"I'm sure it felt true to a distressed ten year old. But you did say you were upset after your father dropped you off from a visit and you didn't exactly have the greatest relationship with him. Rumor has it that he regularly called you a fag or a queer."

"What does that have to do with anything?" asked Uncle Andy.

"I'm just wondering if his father's assertions are correct."

"Don't answer that Will," said Uncle Andy. "It has nothing to do with the case."

"Oh, I think it has everything. A queer kid must feel pretty lonely.. he could imagine things."

"What kind of sick son of a bitch would think that a ten year old kid would want that kind of attention from an 25 year old adult?" asked Uncle Andy incredulously.

"Don't you dare.. don't you dare imply that my son deserved what that son of a bitch did to him," said Joyce.

"I don't think any kid deserves that, Mrs. Byers. You have to understand, Josh Hannity has a mother too and she doesn't want her son's life ruined over stories from a confused kid," said Hank.

"Stella Hannity's son is a piece of shit!" said Joyce. "My son is a wonderful boy who has had a lot happen to him."

"Speaking of a lot happening to him and rumors about this kid being a homosexual aside," said Hank. "There was the incident where he disappeared for a week in 1983. There are records of him being pulled out of school so he could go to therapy because he was having episodes. Maybe it caused him to remember things that didn't actually happen."

"It didn't cause that," said Will. "Since you're so focused on my sexuality, I'll just say that I haven't been able to have sex with anyone because of what he did to me. *Anyone*. Also my disappearance was public knowledge. If you were going to use it to discredit my testimony YOU COULD HAVE TOLD ME BEFORE I HAD TO GO OVER EVERY DETAIL OF SOMETHING I DESPERATELY WANT TO FORGET!"

Will's shouting reached the ears of El, Mike, Eric, and Emma who were sitting in the next room. They all exchanged concerned looks. After a few seconds, he stormed out of the study. They all stood up and started walking toward him. He frantically shook his head and held out his hand before going into the bathroom and slamming the door behind him

Will turned on the fan and the bathroom sink, but his friends could still hear him sobbing. Joyce came out of the study a few seconds later and El pointed at the bathroom door. Joyce walked over and knocked. Normally, she may have let him have a little time, but was afraid to leave him alone in that state of mind.

"Will, Baby, open up," said Joyce gently.

Inside the bathroom, Will had splashed cold water on his face and he was taking calming breaths...Why was he using cold water? The Mind Flayer liked it cold. He opened the door to see his mother standing there with his friends behind her.

"Jonathan!" said Will. "I need to talk to Jonathan." Will walked past everyone to the phone in the kitchen. His hands trembled as he picked it up. "No! I can't bother Jonathan with this, He has to focus on his school work!" Will slammed the phone back down and slid down the wall to the floor. The others stood back while Joyce walked over, knelt beside him, pulled him into an embrace, and began

rocking him.

"Sssh, deep breaths, baby, deep breaths," said Joyce. She couldn't bring herself to tell him that everything was alright, and didn't think he'd want to hear those words anyway. He'd been scared to tell her what had happened at the time because he was afraid of her or Jonathan confronting Josh Hannity and getting hurt. Will had kept a lot of things bottled up his entire life because he was trying to protect other people -or that other people had more important things to worry about than him.

Mike stood there watching. He regretted confronting Josh Hannity after Holly was drugged. If he hadn't, Josh wouldn't have taunted him about Will and no one would have heard and found out. He regretted not standing up more and preventing people from insisting that Will testify. Mike had wanted to do everything to protect Will from feeling the way he felt at that moment and he'd failed.

In the study, the lawyers, the psychologist, and mitigatory were packing up to leave. "I think you have enough information and I think you've put my nephew and the other victims through enough," said Andy.

"*Alleged* victims," said Hank. "You have to understand, I have a client to defend."

"You have to understand that your client is a scumbag," said Andy.

"It is curious," said Hank. "That you advised your nephew to not answer the question of whether or not he's queer. It's a mighty big coincidence that he has a friend suddenly living here that was just kicked out by his parents for being queer."

"You know, my brother was "queer". He hid that fact and fought in 'Nam while other people who weren't even opposed to the war pretended to be queer to get out of enlisting. He ended up killing himself when people found out and treated him like garbage. So, you'll have to excuse me if I find the question as to whether or not my nephew or any other victim is queer, irrelevant. And why I might take the implication that being queer might make a child want to be fondled by an adult a bit personal. While we're on that subject, it is

curious that you and your client are so obsessed with the sexual preferences of children. Now get the hell off my property, you prick!"

Hank left, the mitigatory and psychologist stayed back.

"You guys know my nephew isn't delusional, right?" Andy asked them.

"In my professional opinion," said the psychologist. "Your nephew is telling the truth and he's not delusional at all. So are the other victims. We just have to convince the courts. It's difficult because people in small towns like Hawkins don't want to admit that there's anything wrong with their community."

"Off the record, I'm supposed to be impartial," said the mitigatory. "But I believe that sick son of a bitch should go away for a long time."

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Will was quiet for the rest of the day and no one tried to force him to talk. That evening, he went to bed early. Eric decided that he would go to bed as well. El decided to sit with Joyce and Mike went to Jonathan's old room to add to his letter he'd written to Will.

Eric crept into the room and carefully sat on the full bed as he watch Will laying on the twin bed. "It's alright, I'm not asleep," Will muttered as he faced the wall. "I'm so tired, but I just can't sleep."

Eric stood up, walked over to Will's bed and sat down on the edge. He started to gently message between Will's shoulder blade. "Is this uncomfortable at all?"

Will shook his head. "You never make me uncomfortable and even if you did, I'm not good at hiding it, so you'll know."

Eric laid down behind Will and wrapped his arms around him.

"Eric, your stitches!"

"Hey, give me a little credit," Eric cooed. "I'm being careful."

"Just for a few minutes," said Will.

"Just a few minutes," Eric agreed. "Northern California has a lot of steep hills, you know. We'll have to stretch before we go on hikes."

"Will you massage my legs if I pull muscles?" asked Will as he playfully elbowed Eric.

Eric smiled a little, he took it as a good sign that Will was being playful. "I'll do it even if you don't pull any muscles," said Eric. "We're going to be able to look out at the Pacific Ocean every day. It'll be so beautiful and we'll be so happy."

"Yes," said Will.

"Focus of that thought, Will," Eric whispered as he kissed the side of Will's face. "Focus on it for me."

"I'll do that," said Will. Eric disentangled himself from Will and got into the bigger bed.

A few hours later, Will felt sick to his stomach. He decided to go to the downstairs bathroom so he didn't wake anyone. Mike was already awake adding to his long letter to Will.

Will vomited up what little dinner he'd managed to eat, then dry heaved for a couple minutes. He decided to go out for some fresh air.

Mike watched him go out the back door from the top of the stairs. He heard Will muttering the word "ocean" over and over again. He considered letting Will be alone, but too many memories of Will disappearing came to the forefront of Mike's mind.

The night Will had hung back to confess to Mike that the demogorgan had gotten him only to ride off and get trapped in the Upside Down had started it all. The fact that Will had waited until Dustin and Lucas were out of earshot to confess, should be a huge hint to Mike about how Will felt about his place as an unequal member of the party and how much Will had trusted Mike before Mike betrayed that trust.

Then there were all the times Will had disappeared the following year because he was having episodes... and the Mind Flayer had finally gotten him.

The following summer, Will had stayed out of mortal peril against all odds (at least he hadn't been in more mortal peril than anyone else). He was still going through things. Mike wanted to kick himself for somehow thinking that Will would just get over being possessed by an evil entity and not understanding that Will asking to play D&D so much was his way of saying he needed help. He had also wanted to kick himself for not being able to find the balance between his friends and his love life. He'd managed to alienate everyone he cared about the most.

The final time had nearly destroyed their friendship forever. Mike felt it was a miracle that Will had ever spoken to him again and reminded himself to appreciate that. Will had been having "Now Memories" of Hopper in a prison cell for months. Everyone had written those off as wishful thinking. They should have known better.

When Will and El had come to visit for Christmas, Lucas decided to invite them over to see his family's new heated pool. Dustin had plans with Steve and had invited Will so Lucas and Mike could hang out with Max and El. They should have let Will go with Dustin, but Lucas and Mike had insisted he hang out with them for old times sake. They had tried beer for the first time that night. Will hadn't wanted to, but they had pushed him. Then they had done what they had promised not to do and left Will alone when they went to make out with their girlfriends. Mike and El had sex for the first and last time that night. Will had alone by the pool while it all happened and he was kidnapped by Soviet agents who wanted to exploited his Mind Flayer Spidey sense. It was at least three hours before anyone realized he was gone.

Will and Hopper had managed to escape together. Mike and Lucas somehow thought that when they went to see him in the hospital, their reunion would be exactly as it had been three years earlier after Hopper and Mrs. Byers had rescued Will from the Upside Down. It wasn't. Will had screamed at them not to touch him and that he no longer gave a shit about their apologies. Mike remembered him telling his mother that he didn't belong in Hawkins and he wanted to go home and see his real friends.

It had stung Mike to hear Will say that and he'd even felt angry at him for it initially. Then he'd felt angry at El for hurting his

friendship with Will. By some miracle after that, they had continued to invite him to Columbus for visits (the trauma of yet another confrontation with the evil of the Upside Down had gone a long way to bring about apologies and forgiveness). Eric had pointed out that they had done so because he still mattered to them, even after all the hurt and pain.

Will was sitting on the top step and fidgeting with a slinky when Mike opened the door to the back porch.

"Couldn't sleep?" asked Mike.

"Upset stomach," said Will as he spared Mike a glance. "Sorry, I didn't wake you, did I?"

Of course Will was concerned about a minor inconvenience he may have called someone else, when he himself was going through something traumatic. "No, I'm just working on some writing."

"Oh. I could proofread it if you want," Will offered.

"You'll have a chance to take a look before I leave tomorrow."

"Okay," said Will as he leaned his head on the pillar and stared at the stables behind his uncle's house.

"If you want to be alone, Will, I understand," said Mike. "Total honesty, though, it's hard for me to leave you alone because you've ended up being in danger so many times when I've left you alone."

"That's true," said Will. "You can stay."

"I didn't just leave you alone a lot of the time, I abandoned you. I'm sorry."

"I wasn't your responsibility, Mike. You were just a kid like me."

"No, you were more important than a responsibility. You were my friend.. my best friend and I forgot the rules our party had set up. Maybe I even started thinking those rules were childish. Maybe now, I'm starting to realize that I was actually more mature has a child than I've been as a teenager."

"Hopper would probably agree with that," said Will. "You should visit him before you leave, by the way."

"I'm not sure he'd want to see me," said Mike.

"Offer to go with El," said Will. "It would mean a lot to her. You still love her, don't you?"

"Yeah, of course I do," said Mike.

"Then do this for her. Trust me."

"I do trust you Will. I just want you to be able to trust me again like you used to. I want to be a person you *can* trust."

"I know," said Will as he shifted the slinky in his hands.

"Sorry," said Mike. "I'm just talking and talking and not asking you what you want."

"It's fine, Mike," said Will. "It's keeping my mind off of...just.. keep talking."

"Eric's a good guy," said Mike.

"I agree," said Will.

"I am happy for you. I can tell that he really loves you. You deserve that and he actually deserves you- and that's the highest compliment I can give anyone. He could have been really defensive about.. what I did last month, but he wasn't."

Will smiled a little. "Well, no offense, Mike, but he knows you're not a threat to him."

"He knows that and he also trusts you. I, on the other hand took you for granted. I just figured I could confess my feelings whenever and you'd just be happy. Eric risked everything just to tell you how he felt. I wasn't willing to take that risk. He also valued you as a friend like I should have."

"Mike."

"What?"

"You're not Eric. You don't have to try to be. He's not you either. You were my first friend. Nothing has changed that and nothing ever will. It's why some of the things you've done have hurt more than things other people have done, though; but it's also why I could never just cut you out of my life however angry I was when we fought. For the record, stuff between us hasn't been entirely your fault. I could have tried a little harder. I could have just told you I didn't want to play D&D when you planned that surprise campaign instead of making myself sick."

"I should have listened to me when you said you were done with it instead of trying to force you to get over things on my terms." Mike was finding himself saying a lot of the things he'd written to Will in his letter. "I've insisted on having things on my own terms for so many things. I kept El to myself all those months instead of letting her be a part of the party. Before that, I tried to keep you all to myself even though Dustin and Lucas wanted to help. I can't promise I'll never screw up again, but I'm going to work on not insisting that everything be on my terms anymore and pay attention to what other people want. I want to fix things with you and El more than anything, Will, I really do. I'm not going to force it though, because it matters what you want."

"I do want to fix things, Mike, and so does El. It'll take time, though."

"I can be patient," said Mike. "And I promise that it won't take something terrible happening or my own jealousy to show you how much I care about you in the future."

"Good," said Will. There was an awkward silence. Mike frantically searched his mind to think of something to say as Will folded his hands in front of his face and took deep breaths. Tears began running down his cheeks.

Mike decided to do what came naturally. He slid next to Will and pulled him into a hug as he had done so many times when they were younger. Ever since Will had destroyed Castle Byers, he had always rejected Mike's attempts to give him physical comfort. For a moment, Mike thought he was going to reject the attempt at that moment as

Will initially tensed up, but he quickly returned the hug and began sobbing into Mike's shoulder.

"Breathe," Mike murmured as he rubbed circles on Will's back. "Can I ask you something, Will."

Mike felt Will nod against his shoulder.

"I kept hearing you saying 'ocean' before you came out here a few minutes ago. Why was that about?"

Will took a few calming breaths and looked up at Mike. The taller boy saw a glimmer of the trust the shorter boy had once shown him reflected in his eyes. "It's Eric's happy place. He says we'll see the Ocean every day when we go to Berkeley next fall. He was picturing it when he was trying not to think about his so-called father beating the shit out of him. He told me to picture it tonight. It helps."

"He's really good at helping you," said Mike. "Do you think I could visit you out there sometime? We could see the Golden Gate Bridge or something."

"Yeah," said Will as he rested his head on Mike's shoulder again. "Yeah, there's so much to see out there."

"So much," said Mike. "There's no one else I'd rather see it with."

XX

AN; Okay this may or may not be the end of this fic, I haven't decided. I think I'll take a break to finish some fics that I started before I knew anything about Season 3. This fic was ultimately about Mike and Will trying to fix their friendship and Mike trying to fix his relationship with Eleven, even though I can't write Eleven for shit in this continuity. Sorry Eleven fans, but she's much more heavily featured in my pre- season 3 fics. Mike is on his way to healing his bonds with the lions twins as I called Will and Eleven (they both had stuffed lions in season one, and they've had a lot of similarities in their arc. Hopefully, they have more meaningful interaction next season as siblings who have been tormented by the Upside Down). And hopefully in the next season we see the return of the Mike Wheeler who had a lot of empathy and was a devoted friend.

He didn't show much empathy to Will in Season 3 and didn't even show much empathy to Eleven- except when he acknowledged it was wrong for him to try and keep her to himself.

If you want any questions answered about this fic, feel free to PM me or leave a review.